

Grim

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1. 'Death and All His Friends'

I remember the rain. The streets were empty and dark, the yellow light of the lamps glowing on the slick pavement, brightening my path. I stumbled down the road, my cheeks and nose stinging with cold, as I attempted to keep my composure. There wasn't a person in sight. Drinking my grief away had seemed less fun at the moment than it had hours earlier, and the dull ache stayed preeminent in my chest. I urged my feet to continue, *left foot, right foot*, one after another, hoping not to collapse in a pile on the sidewalk.

I was so focused on keeping my feet in front of me that I ceased to realize I was walking right past the docks. The sidewalk veered off onto a cement pad that dropped off into the lake. I didn't even realize I had fallen until I was underwater.

I'm not even sure how it happened, but I must've slipped somehow. I was certain about one thing: the water was freezing. The feeling was like no other, the numbness enveloping every inch of me until I couldn't feel a thing. My first reaction must have been to gasp for air because the dirty water quickly filled my lungs, the taste repulsive in my mouth. *I was drowning.*

I knew that even if my head wasn't spinning I still would not have been strong enough to fight the tide. The strangest thing occurred when I was sure I was dying.

My body screamed for air as I tried to claw my way through the waves, choking on the water. When I finally gave up, the glow of the streetlights seemed to brighten, cascading over the surface of the lake. The inky water lightened, and I saw it. I tried my best to convince myself I was dreaming, that the fight for my life put me into a state of

exhaustion because it was either that or I was going mad, who's to say I wasn't. The dark figure moved most peculiarly. It was almost elegant, *almost*. It moved as if there was no water at all, and it seemed unscathed by the icy temperature. I must have really been out of it, but it almost seemed to walk?

As it moved closer it became more apparent to me that it was a man. He was surrounded by a black fog, *as cheesy as that sounds*, and he wore a suit.

My body could no longer take the lack of oxygen, every part of me ached as I sank lower into the deep. The man approached me and placed a pale hand on my forearm. It was like a breath of fresh air. The water seemed to brighten even more, as if that were possible, and I felt myself take a deep breath. *Breathing? In the lake? No way.* I was standing in the thick mud on the lake floor now. He spoke.

'It's time.'

I knew instantly what he meant. I tried to argue but my head was pounding and adrenaline rushed through my body. He reached down and took my hand. In a blur we were standing in the middle of the street. My clothes were dry, and I felt clean, fresh, and sober. I looked back as he led me down the street. I'm not sure what I was hoping to see.

'Where are you taking me?' My voice was clear and sure, something I was not expecting. He didn't answer. His stubborn silence was almost comforting, but I wanted to know what would happen next. I felt strangely at peace with the fact that I was dead. I reached up with my free hand and placed it over my heart as I walked. The familiar *thump-thump* in my chest was absent, it was still ... and silent. I was certain after that, and I knew that wherever he was taking me, we wouldn't be coming back.

I wasn't afraid of him, funnily enough. I didn't think he was going to hurt me, and I felt oddly safe as he walked me down the quiet streets. After a few minutes, we passed the bar I'd been sitting at earlier that night. I was ashamed. A few drinks meant to cheer me up had led me to death. The regret came fast and the tears followed. *What would my father think?* What would my friends and family think? My mom? My

head began to clear from the shock, I felt awful for leaving them. Gone with no explanation, no goodbye, leaving my mother to grieve my father's eventual death on her own.

They would never see me again. 'Will they miss me?' I whispered to the man's back (or maybe to myself?).

He paused and turned to face me. 'I'm most certain.' A tear streamed down my cheek. He held my face in his hands 'Don't cry. They will miss you, but they understand. Death can be an unpredictable thing.' He wiped my tears with the pad of his thumb and smiled.

'Was it something I did? To deserve this, I mean?'

'Nothing. You have done nothing.' He shook his head and looked up to the sky, 'It's just the way the world works. It's cruel and unfair at times, but the universe always has a plan.' He looked at me as if he had done it a thousand times before.

Time with him was different. It was short, but it dragged on; it was strange. He led me through various streets of towns I had never seen before. He never seemed to tire, but then again neither did I. Every time we turned a corner, we were suddenly walking on a new path, in a new place. It was magical. I didn't dare break the tension by asking questions about it. Every so often the odd stranger would pass, but they never seemed to notice us strolling hand-in-hand. We rounded one last corner before we stopped. We were on some type of a mountain from what I could tell, *a cliff?* The stars scattered across the horizon lit up the sky, glistening like diamonds.

He sat on the large patch of untamed grass near the edge of the hilltop and patted the spot next to him. I sat down slowly, keeping my eyes on him. His were on the sky.

'So, where are we?' *Were we even in New York anymore?* I highly doubted it. 'My favourite place.' His tone was soft. He lowered himself onto the soft ground so that he was facing the stars. 'I love the stars that pop up here at night.' He pointed out one in particular 'That one is my favourite; it's always the brightest.' I laid down to look at the star, but I couldn't make out exactly where he was pointing. He grabbed my hand and squeezed it gently. 'I'm sorry.' --- I awoke to the sound of a

bustling city. I squinted at the window, the sun burning my eyes. It took me until my eyes adjusted to realize I was in my apartment. *What happened to me? How did I get home? Who was he?* I couldn't think straight. My head was buzzing. I could smell something good coming from the kitchen and I could hear someone singing. *Mom? What the hell is she doing here?* Leaving the comfort of my warm bed, my head pounding, I went to investigate. 'Mom?' My voice was rough and low, my throat felt like knives.

'Lydia! I thought you'd never get out of bed.'

'What are you doing here, Mom?' She gave a dirty look. 'Not that I'm not happy to see you ... but --'

'I just thought I'd stop by and make you breakfast on my way to visit your aunt Neeva.'

'Aunt Neeva?'

'Oh yes, she left her glasses at the house again. Heaven forbid...' As she spoke I tried my hardest to think about what happened last night. It came in faint flashes. Crawling onto the shore. *Or was I being dragged?* She piled bacon on my plate and left in a hurry; a kiss on the cheek and she was out the door. That was my mother though, rushing everywhere.

The moment the front door closed I ran to the bedroom, memories of days before flowing through my mind. 'Where is it? Where is it?!' I tore through my drawers and baskets, but it was nowhere to be found. I finally spotted the worn corner peeking out from underneath a pink sweatshirt. The cover sketchbook had been bent and torn over time, but it seemed to be in no worse condition than the last time it was used. I stepped backwards slowly to sit on the bed. I opened the book to the most recent drawing. The person in the drawing had the same sharp cheekbones and regal jaw as the man from the night before. Even in the drawing, his eyes held the same strict look, with a glint of sympathy. He looked sad, the type of sadness you carry with you your whole life. As if he had grown exhausted to the bone but continued nevertheless.

I had a vague memory of hastily sketching the image out after a hauntingly detailed dream I had the week before the accident. I could still remember it so clearly.

Flashes of blue and white lights; a black sky scattered with constellations; the figure of a man with his back turned, looking out over a cliff; the rushing waves of the lake central to the town; and voices whispering—begging me near.

I had dreamt about my death before it happened, but I didn't die that night. My head began to spin as I questioned everything. The only thing I knew was that I *had* to find the man who was with me.

2: Missing Pieces

I rubbed my eyes again. My screen was blurry. After days of vigorous research, I'd had no luck in my search for the man in black. The hunt was especially complicated as I had no name, title, or basic information of any sort to work with. I'd spent all my time trying to find this mystery man, to the point of leaving my apartment in shambles. Looking up from my computer led me to see the entire living space cluttered with empty coffee mugs, various loose papers, unfolded laundry, and one too many TV dinner boxes.

I decided that a nice hot shower would help me think. I abandoned my work, pushing my notebook and laptop aside, and made my way to the bathroom. Seeing my reflection startled me: my eyes were dull, and the bags under them dark and prominent. I looked like hell. Staring into the reflection, I could have sworn I saw it change, and for a brief moment, I was underwater. The feeling left as soon as it came, leaving me standing wide-eyed over the sink.

The hot water poured over my cold body, wetting my tangled hair. I closed my eyes and soaked in the warmth. I pulled myself from my frozen-in-bliss state and slowly began my shower routine. I felt the hot air on my neck before I heard it: 'Lydia,' the voice whispered, almost as if someone was standing behind me.

I whipped around immediately, expecting to see some creep or a monster, but all that was there was an empty shower and the loud pelting

of the water. I shut off the tap and ripped the curtain back. There was no way I was going back in there.

I paced through the small apartment, leaving trails of water behind me. *What just happened? Was I losing it? Why me? Why now?* I needed real answers. Something wasn't right. Everything felt different, and I knew what I needed to do.

The docks. That's where it all started.

My heart raced as I got dressed, the mixture of fear and possibility twisting in my stomach. It was quite logical. If I went back to the docks where I fell, he might be waiting there. The odds of him being there were not great, but I had hope.

The docks were dry now. The days of steady downpour left the water higher than usual, but the docks remained barren. The parking lot was empty. The sun was beating down hard from the late afternoon sky, heating the pavement. I moved slowly along the length of the launch, wringing my hands as I walked. When I reached the spot where I'd fallen — and should have died — I stood in place and looked around for any sign of who I was looking for, or anyone at all.

I saw nothing. No boats in the harbour, no workers in the concession stand, no children playing, no animals, nothing. The lack of usual chatter in a public area was strange and made me feel uneasy in an indescribable sense. I continued to stand and wait, watching the waves lap against the cement walkway. I heard voices and whispers, but they were incoherent. They overlapped and mixed, creating a buzz of noise that was quiet, but overtaking. I looked back, expecting to see people gossiping on the picnic benches, but the harbour looked the same: empty.

I tried to listen, to make out what they were saying, but it was utter nonsense. I froze in fear, I tried to force myself to move, but I was stuck. After a minute or two, the harder I focused on the noise, the more clear it became. 'Lydia,' A feminine voice whispered. I felt a hot breath on my neck, but I knew if I looked the spot next to me would be vacant. The voices continued, they were all saying my name now, in a messy jumble of syllables.

‘Lydia.’ ‘Lydia?’ ‘Lydia!’ They were building in volume and intensity faster than I could comprehend when I found myself taking a step forward. Suddenly my whole intention shifted, and all I could think about was the powerful waves slamming against the wall below me. The rhythm of the crashing and the voices blended into a mesmerizing melody that quickly drew me in.

I wanted to jump. Envelop myself in the waves as I did once before, and I knew that’s what the voices were. They were calling to me from the lake, beckoning me into the depths.

I had to jump.

The pull was magnetic, and a small part of me knew it was insane, but the other part knew that this was the absolute right move. A large boat passed abruptly, dragging me out of my trance. The voices stopped completely. The family onboard waved at me, with smiles plastered on their faces as they passed. I raised a trembling hand in a meek greeting, confusion clouding my senses. They hastily moved out of sight and I was left in the silence once again, my ears ringing loudly, giving me a headache.

During the walk back to my apartment, I carried a heavy feeling of numbness and regret. *Why did I give in? I was about to repeat the very thing that killed me...or almost killed me? Whatever.*

By the time I got back to my front door, all I wanted to do was sleep it off. It was just getting dark now and every bone in my body ached with exhaustion. I opened the door and stumbled inside the dark room. I made my way to the standing lamp next to the couch, and flicked it on.

He was looking out the window. I screamed at first, surprised to see someone in my previously locked apartment, but he turned to face me and the fear drained from my body. ‘How did you find me?’ I sat down, letting the calm wash over me.

‘Don’t worry about that now, I didn’t mean to startle you.’ I held my breath as I watched him carefully run a hand across a heap of books on my desk beneath the windowsill. ‘You can’t go looking for me like that again Lydia.’

‘What do you mean? I think I deserve some answers.’ I was frustrated with the entire situation at this point.

‘The water ... did it ... *speak* to you?’ He gave me a look that told me he was simplifying things for me like a preschool teacher.

‘Yes. I think so.’ I didn’t dare tell him about the near-jumping at the docks.

‘That’s fate. She’s pushing you to drown. She’s angry with me. You must be careful, and promise me you won’t go back there again.’

‘I won’t.’

‘Do you understand what I’m talking about?’ He glided across the room gracefully and placed a hand on my shoulder. I shook my head. ‘You were supposed to drown that night. It was my job to send you on your way, to the afterlife, *your* afterlife. I tried. I did try, but I couldn’t do it, not with you.’

‘Why not?’

He pulled his hand away. ‘I don’t have the time to explain it now, but I’ve known you for a long time.’

‘Oh.’ I grew quiet, embarrassed. ‘Does that make you my guardian angel or something?’

He chuckled. It was comforting, as it had been that first night. ‘Not quite.’

‘So who are you?’ He furrowed his brows, confused. ‘Or...what are you?’

‘Lydia, I’m the Grim Reaper.’